Mixed Signals: Radio Broadcasting Policy in India

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Broadcasting in our country continues to be governed by two archaic legislations and regulated through an assortment of laws that have been scripted as expedient measures to tackle high priority short-term demands. There exists no comprehensive policy that takes into account the contradictory pulls surrounding broadcasting in India.

The principles and practices of broadcasting as they have existed and evolved in India are audibly reflected in the key issues that the media planners and policy-makers have sought to resolve at different times in more than 75 years of its existence now. The discourses and imperatives at any given time with regard to Indian broadcasting have been quite in conflict with each other. The state's monopoly over broadcasting is under attack, while anxiety is being expressed for regulating the invasion from satellite because of its perceived impact on national culture and cultural identities. While private broadcasters are seeking free market for media, and consumers are demanding the right to choose, there is worry over the increasing commercialisation and homogenisation of media content that is thwarting its public service function.

However, a temporal perspective of the history of broadcasting in India shows that certain vital concerns have been ignored over several eras though they find a consistent mention in the reports of various committees periodically appointed by the government of India to examine media-related issues. Some such perennial questions relate to people's access to communication technologies and content, audience participation for perpetuating plurality of ideas and facilitating self-representation through popular and community based media. These subjects are discernible in the fascinating debates on the nature of appropriate media policy in India and are conceptualised in documents that should ideally form the underpinnings of the broadcasting scenario in the country.

An analysis of the broadcasting form and functioning in India reveals that the attempts to address such persistent inadequacies or to balance the dilemmas facing broadcasting have been marked by pressures other than those of public service and the pressing demands by civil society. As a result, broadcasting in our country continues to be governed by the archaic Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 and the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933 and regulated through an assortment of legislation that have been scripted as expedient populist measures by suave politicians to tackle high priority short-term demands. There exists nothing in the form of a comprehensive policy that takes into account the contradictory pulls of the concerns surrounding broadcasting in India and places its role within the context of new socio-political and techno-economic realities.

An example of how governments appropriate and co-opt fervent concerns and give them an interpretation that is convenient to their political interests is the recent public policy pronouncement to grant 'community broadcasting' licences to established universities, colleges and schools. This decision to allow setting up FM transmitters to run radio stations in the campuses is being projected as a move to open up the broadcasting sector for nonprofit social sector by allowing community radio stations. While the policy pronouncement is not unwelcome as it dilutes somewhat the hegemony of the state and market over broadcasting, but to open it up for an urban, educated, elite coterie in areas that are already well served by media betrays the fundamental philosophy behind community radio as the world understands it today. The historical philosophy of community radio is to use this medium as the voice of the voiceless, the mouthpiece of oppressed people and generally as a tool for development [AMARC 1998].

It is mere tokenism to say that these stations would provide space for development and change-oriented content. If it does not enable the marginalised, rural or poor populace to disseminate their own messages and to challenge the mainstream understanding of social issues, the whole purpose is lost. But the government is content with postponing the critical decision of allowing autonomous broadcasting spaces to communities and the social sector as that entails re-distribution of power and control over media resources and technologies. The history of the broadcasting system in India is witness to the fact that one of the main factors that perpetuates status quo is the desire of the state to retain control. In fact, the attitude of successive governments even after more than half a century of independence has unmistakable traces of the norms set by the British who introduced organised broadcasting in the country.

Legacy of Indian Broadcasting

The first regular radio service was inaugurated in India by the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) with the opening of the Bombay Station on July 23, 1927.[1] The then viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, inaugurated this 1.5 KW station with an effective range of 30 miles (48 kms.). This came about seven months after the creation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the UK in January 1927 as a publicly funded organisation with John Reith as its first director general. Indian broadcasting has borrowed much of its programming pattern, philosophy and even talent for development from the Corporation. However, except for the first two years and eight months, when broadcasting was operated as a commercial venture, it has been under government control in India till recently when it has taken on the avatar of a public corporation.[2]

It is interesting to observe the similarities between the maiden *Report on the Progress of Broadcasting in India* issued from the office of the first controller of broadcasting, government of India, Lionel Fielden on June 3, 1939 and the content categories of statistics in the *Annual Report* of All India Radio published by Prasar Bharati in 2002. This goes to show that the parameters to validate performance and define what "puts national broadcasting on a proper footing"[3] do not seem to have undergone any prominent changes even after independence. The interests of the British government largely guided the expansion of radio during the colonial period and importance was given to the economic, strategic, engineering and administrative aspects. In this report, Fielden included "a historical survey of broadcasting in India" as "no separate report on Indian broadcasting had previously been issued". The prototypes of such reports passed on from our colonisers to the present heads of government are modelled to project the top-down 'reach' of the medium, which is sought to be justified in terms of growth, spread, coverage of area and of population, listenership percentages, programming patterns and the number of languages of broadcast.

The Indian Broadcasting Company started in 1927, went into liquidation by March 1930. Fielden's report ascribes this failure to high prices of receiving sets at ₹500 for a four valve set, an undercapitalised company, and to "Indian conditions and

[1]According to the Akash Bharati report, the inauguration of IBC's Bombay station was reported in the *Times of India* in a banner headline, reading 'Viceroy Inaugurates a Wireless Era for India'.

[2]According to H R Luthra, Nehru, in 1948, had advocated in favour of a set up approximating the BBC public corporation model. Letters of appointment of Akashvani staff have always included the stipulation that they are liable to transfer at any time to the service under a public corporation.

[3]An expression borrowed from the Chanda Committee report.

traditions" that were "by no means as favourable to the rapid growth of broadcasting as those of the west" [Fielden 1939:3]. Ironically, he also acknowledges later, that slow increase of licensed listeners could have been owing to the small coverage radius of the two stations (the second 1.5 KW station was started in Calcutta in August 1927) and successive curtailment of expenditure by the government resulting in low standard of programmes. A decisive factor he says was "undoubtedly the great difficulty in collecting both the licence fees and the 'tribute' " [Fielden 1939:3].

In April 1930, government of India took over broadcasting following 'universal' representations for action from existing licence holders and dealers of wireless equipment who were stuck with stockpiles of broadcasting kits and it was placed in the department of industries and labour as 'Indian State Broadcasting Service'. To deal with the alleged evasion of payment of licence fee and to monitor possession of wireless gear, the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933 was brought into force, which made the possession of radio receivers and wireless equipment without a licence an offence.

The Indian government's current monopoly over radio and television broadcasting derives from this act together with the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 (and its subsequent amendments) which gives exclusive privileges of the establishment, maintenance and working of wireless apparatus to the centre. With these two laws and some other means of obtaining sufficient revenue in place, broadcasting turned into a profitable venture by 1934, and the "government felt justified in embarking on a policy of development" [Fielden 1939: 6]. As the years 1931–34 had seen an increase in the listenership of radio although there were no new stations added and no improvements in programming. Fielden attributes this spurt to the starting of the empire service of the BBC in December 1932 and "the consequent purchase of sets by a large number of Europeans in India" [Fielden 1939: 2].

Fielden himself arrived in India in the year 1935 with the brief to work out the development scheme for Indian broadcasting for which ₹20 lakh, (later raised to ₹40 lakh) were allotted. He and H L Kirke, technical expert from BBC, felt that the amount was disproportionately inadequate for a country like India,

> In Europe which may be compared with India from point of view of size and coverage, there are over 100 high and medium power stations, representing a total cost of 10 crore rupees. From this it is clear that the service, which can be given to India for a sum of 40 lakhs, will be poor [Fielden 1939:11].

Their report made recommendations for expansion of broadcasting to rural areas, stating that though Indian State Broadcasting Service was more a commercial than social service, "the idea of self-supporting service was wrong and government

should devote the limited funds available to 'unremunerative' stations in rural areas." The emphasis on planning they felt would initially bring funds "only from the sophisticated listeners who can pay for their entertainment," but there was a possibility to "provide a service both for the towns and for the villages; which has within it the seed of development on a self-supporting basis" [Fielden 1939:13].

January 1, 1936 saw the setting up of the 20 KW Delhi Station from 18, Alipur road as the first new centre under the new scheme of expansion and development of Indian broadcasting.[4] On June 8, 1936, the nomenclature of the Indian State Broadcasting Service changed to All India Radio (AIR).[5] Ahmed Shah Bokhari joined AIR as station director in March 1936 on deputation from the Government College Lahore and became the deputy controller of broadcasting in June 1936[6] and C W Goyder, another expert from BBC, became AIR's first chief engineer in August 1936. Goyder, who differed with Kirke's plan for medium wave transmitters, is remembered for the short wave coverage of the entire country, which he achieved with Fielden's backing by 1938 [Luthra 1986; Baruah 1983]. Walter Kaufman, director of western music programmes in Bombay, composed AIR's signature tune in the year 1936 [MIB 1978].

Broadcasting began in India as a private amateur venture, but even after it rolled into the hands of the British government, the Indian princely states were given the right to construct and use transmitters and to collect fees for receiving sets as stipulated in the government of India Act 1935. This is an amusing historical nugget because after independence, though the Indian government has emulated British rules, guidelines and planned approaches to broadcasting, it has kept broadcasting firmly in the hands of the government at the centre [Ninan 1998]. Bokhari succeeded Fielden as the controller in 1940 and was at the helm of AIR till almost the end of war. With the declaration of the second world war all expansion plans were stayed but urgent steps were taken to increase the hours of transmission of centralised news bulletins in various Indian languages (totaling 27 in a day) to counter Nazi propaganda and to promote the allied cause[7] [Luthra 1986, MIB 1978].

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[4]According to H R Luthra and the Akash Bharati Report, on the same day, the programme journal *Indian Radio Time* was redesigned and named *The Indian Listener*. It remained unchanged for the next 22 years, when it became *Akashvani*.

[5]The story of how the name 'All India Radio' came to be coined is related by Fielden in his autobiography, *The Natural Bent* [Fielden 1960].

[6]With A S Bokhari's brother Z A Bokhari becoming the station director, critics could not resist labelling AIR the Bokhari Brothers Corporation (BBC) [Luthra 1986].

[7]External Services broadcasts started at this time, the first broadcast commencing on October 1, 1939.

In 1937 AIR was transferred from the department of labour and industries to the department of communications. It was relocated to the department of information and broadcasting, set up in 1941, which, after independence, became the ministry of information and broadcasting (MIB) in 1947. AIR moved to its new Broadcasting House in Parliament Street in February 1943 and in the same year, the controller of broadcasting designation was changed to director general [Baruah 1983, Chatterji 1991]. On June 3, 1947 viceroy Lord Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah made their historic broadcasts on the partition of India. The transfer of power on the midnight of August 14–15, 1947 was broadcast live with Jawaharlal Nehru's famous speech 'Tryst with Destiny' which is preserved in the archives of AIR [Baruah 1983]. The first and the only time Gandhiji visited the Broadcasting House in Delhi was on Diwali in 1947 when he addressed refugees at the Kurukshetra camp [Luthra 1986].

The responsibility of the broadcasting to 'serve' the public through programmes that 'inform, educate and entertain' was part of the paternalistic Reithean legacy with which AIR set out after independence to 'improve' the masses by giving them not what they sought to hear, but what they ought to hear. As affirmed by all the ensuing *Annual Reports* of AIR and also posted on its web site, the objectives of broadcasting in India seek to "provide information, education and wholesome entertainment, keeping in view the motto, 'Bahujan Hitaya; Bahujan Sukhaya', i.e., the benefit and happiness of large sections of the people," and strive to "produce and transmit varied programmes designed to awaken, inform, enlighten, educate, entertain and enrich all sections of the people, with due regard to the fact that the national broadcast audience consists of a whole series of public" (AIR web site).

With a view to realise these objectives, a regime of planned development of broadcasting to cover the country, as kicked off by Fielden and reworked by Goyder, was brought back to life. Over the years, with allocation of funds made in all subsequent Five Year Plans (FYPs), All India Radio has developed into "one of the largest media networks in the world" and boasts today of a network of 209 broadcasting centres (which include 113 regional and 76 local radio stations) and 149 medium wave, 55 high frequency (SW) and 131 FM transmitters. The broadcast coverage of 89.66% by area is received by 98.84% of the people in 24 languages and 146 dialects in home service. AIR broadcasts in 26 (10 Indian and 16 foreign) languages in its external services. As against a mere 2,75,955 receiving sets[8] in 1947, now there are about 12.5 crore (7.1 crore FM sets) radio sets in about 11.7 crore radio households in

[8]According to the Chanda Committee report, the number of radio licences had doubled from 2,75,955 in 1947 to 5,46,319 in 1950.

the country with the number of average actual listeners of AIR on any day in radio homes all over India estimated at 30.4 crore [Prasar Bharati 2002].

Planned Growth of Infrastructure

The history of the growth of broadcasting network and expansion of its coverage is chronicled in the All India Radio annual reports, in books,[9] almost all of which have been written by former AIR officials, and in a couple of government publications. The reports of committees set up from time to time to review the status of broadcasting in India also recount major landmarks in its progress. The first formal review of the working of the official media in India[10] came about with the appointment by MIB of a committee under the chairmanship of Asok K Chanda, former auditor general, government of India, in 1964 to, among other things,"examine and evaluate the operations, policies, programmes and production of the various media units of the ministry." It was a time when there "had been persistent criticism both in parliament and the press of the deficiencies of All India Radio," and also "a belated realisation in official quarters that the media of mass communication had largely failed to inform, educate and entertain the people and to enlist their cooperation in fulfilling the plans of social and economic development" [MIB 1966:2].

At the time when the Chanda Committee submitted its report on Radio and Television (April 18, 1966), All India Radio (AIR) had acquired a fairly extensive set-up with the MIB embarking on a two-phase plan for expansion of broadcasting service. In the initial phase, with Sardar Vallabhai Patel,[11] the first and ostensibly the most influential minister for information and broadcasting, at the helm of affairs, a scheme to build up 'pilot' stations with one KW medium wave transmitters was taken up to expand radio broadcasting infrastructure in state capitals and in border areas and to include the linguistic and cultural areas that had remained uncovered.

[9] These include, *Broadcasting in India* by G C Awasthy, *All about AIR and Broadcasting and the People* by Mehra Masani, *Tangled Tapes* by KS Mullick, *Radio Programmes of All India Radio* by Pamela Philipose, *What Ails Indian Broadcasting* by K S Duggal.

[10] Chanda Committee report points out that many countries including the UK and Canada have found it necessary to institute periodic reviews of their broadcasting systems by independent committees but it has not been so in India. H R Luthra cites it as a case in point that the BBC during its 40 years had been reported upon by four expert commissions: Crawford Committee (1925), Ullswater Committee (1935), Beveridge Committee (1950) and Pilkington Committee.

[11] In his book, *My Reminiscences of Sardar Patel*, V Shanker, his private secretary, mentions that one of the first steps taken by Sardar Patel to 'clean up' radio was to prohibit musicians 'whose private lives were a public scandal'. Some regarded this as a measure directed against Muslim women artists.

At the time of independence, the AIR network had six stations located at Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Lucknow and Tiruchirapalli. While the Baroda Station was taken over in 1948, in 1950, all the other four 'native' stations belonging to former princely states, Hyderabad, Aurangabad, Mysore and Trivandrum were integrated with AIR. By 1950, the number of stations had risen from 11 to 25 and AIR network was in a position to serve listeners in all regional languages but could embrace only 21% of the country's population and 12% of its area [Baruah 1983]. The Staff Training Institute was started in July 1948 to impart in-service training to various cadres of the programme and administrative staff of AIR and Doordarshan. Broadcasting along with post, telegraphs, telephones and wireless was placed in the Union List of the Seventh Schedule on January 26, 1950 under the newly effective Constitution of India.

In the second phase of AIR network expansion, which became part of the Five Year Plan, the existing stations were upgraded or replaced by stations of higher power (MIB, 1966). It is interesting to note that during the first FYP period, six new radio stations were opened and a few stations closed down[12] keeping the number of broadcasting centres almost constant at 26, by the end of the plan. Several low-power transmitters were upgraded, although no new transmitters were set up. Though the numbers remained unchanged, the reach of broadcasting swelled manifold covering 46% of population and 31% in terms of area [Prasar Bharati 2002]. Several high power medium and short wave transmitters were installed during the second FYP and the third FYP undertook to execute an ambitious medium wave expansion scheme with the primary objective to extend the AIR network to the whole country.

In the years subsequent to independence, India had ventured out to become progressive and industrialised in keeping with the west-inspired dominant paradigm of development of the 1950s through 1970s. Mass media were seen as instruments to change the mindset of the people and to create a climate for modernisation and development through centralised economic planning, large-scale industrialisation and the expansion of basic communication infrastructure [Lerner 1958, Schramm 1964, Rogers 1976]. The Chanda Committee endorsed this view and expressed its dissatisfaction with the place given to the development of mass communication in India. It felt that the media had not been adequately harnessed for informing, educating and enthusing people to participate actively in the social and economic development programmes. The committee observed that radio had not been accorded priority with respect to the allocations made in successive plans:

> ... despite its own evaluation that the plans have failed to evoke the expected response

[12] These included the Shillong, Baroda, Amritsar, and Mysore stations.

> in the country, the Planning Commission has persistently overlooked the potentiality of radio in enlisting public cooperation in implementing plans and programmes designed to bring progress and prosperity to the community. In continuing to regard broadcasting as a routine function of the state and giving it routine treatment, the Commission has also ignored the experience of other countries, which have accelerated the pace of development by imaginative use of radio and television [MIB 1966:10][13]

Commenting on the policies and plans of the technical coverage of AIR, the Committee reiterated the need for additional measures to facilitate wider coverage and stressed the need for a 'reasoned' review of the direction of quantitative expansion, in order to ensure a balanced growth of AIR network, selection of ideal locations and procurement of standardised equipment which may even be indigenously produced.

> We have found that neither the location of the transmitters nor their procurement is always determined on technical considerations. Regional pressures for transmitters have often lead to the choice of unsuitable locations for the coverage intended. Similarly, political considerations have intervened in the selection of sources of supply [MIB 1966:33].

The report pointed out that lack of funds and faulty orientation were factors inhibiting the potential of AIR's rural broadcasts and the impact of its external services.

> Its transmitters and studio equipment are insufficient, largely obsolete or obsolescent, its broadcasts cannot even reach the sensitive areas of north-east Frontier, let alone project the correct image of India overseas or counteract unfriendly propaganda, and its planning and administrative staff are lacking in vision and imagination [MIB 1966: 12].

The Chanda Committee pointed out that deficiencies, both of the instruments of transmission and reception, were rendering rural services ineffective. Community listening was suffering on account of maintenance of receiving sets. It suggested that to make coverage of rural areas meaningful mass production of low cost transistorised sets and their distribution was essential[14]. The report emphasised that for

[13] He observes that, in both the first and the second FYP, allocation to broadcasting was about one-tenth of one % of the total resources while it was reduced to one-eighth of the total resources in the third plan.

[14] *Also see* Sanjay (1991), for an account of the problems that arose for rural listeners as manufacture of reception sets was left entirely to market forces.

qualitative improvement of coverage; at least two-channel transmission be provided in all regions. The report recommended that low-power transmitters be installed in each compact agricultural area that would primarily deliver services for ministry of health, agriculture and education. It suggested that such local transmitters could operate on frequency modulation (FM), which AIR was proposing to introduce only in the metros, and that a plan to manufacture FM receiving sets also be drawn up simultaneously.

> In countries so large and varied as India, most states have groups with different cultures, customs and traditions. The Stations should be placed to cater to their divergent needs and requirements. Yet, for example, the Ranchi Station located at the centre of the tribal belt of Chhota Nagpur can provide only snippets of song and drama for tribal community. The commissioner of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes has complained that All India Radio has not given much time and attention to the tribal people [MIB 1966:29].

However, it was only in July 1977 that the first FM service started from Madras and it was not until October 30, 1984 that the first local station was established at Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu. The lacuna observed in the working of the planning and development unit of AIR was that on one hand, advice of technical staff was overlooked by higher officials to accommodate political factors, while on the other, no programme official was associated with the structuring of a broadcasting centre. Hence the stations were being built without any insight into the scope and objectives of its programmes leaving very little flexibility for programme planners who had to fit their content to the available facilities.

National, Commercial and Rural Broadcasts

The Chanda Committee castigated AIR's programme policy in the two decades of its functioning after independence on the grounds that the government was overlooking development imperatives and that a technical infrastructure built with public resources was being misused for propaganda of public policy and as a vehicle for setting political agendas. Centralisation and bureaucratisation were resulting in improper selection of talent, curbing of staff enterprise for adventurous programmes, inadequate remuneration to artistes and indifference in content, quality and presentation of programmes. The inquiries by the committee brought to the forefront what listeners long knew, that AIR programmes were dull and drab and low on variety. They did not engage with contentious political matters or even those of civic consequence. A 'psychology of conformity' prevailed in AIR as recruitment of directing

staff ensured unquestioning compliance, influential people monopolised talks and discussions and even among them, eminent people critical of administrative policies were avoided [MIB 1966].

Other visible trends during this period were the remodelling of programmes towards a new nationalist image, a countrywide broadcast of national programmes and the promotion of Hindi as the national language. On July 1952, the first national programme of music went on air. In October the same year the national orchestra (Vadya Vrinda') was set up in Delhi under the conductorship of Pandit Ravi Shankar. The carnatic violin-player T K Jairam later joined the orchestra as the second conductor [Baruah 1983]. The national programme of talks (English) went on air in April 1953. Regional news bulletins were started from Lucknow (Hindi) and Nagpur (Marathi) on April 15, 1953. National programmes of operas, plays and features were started in 1956 and AIR came to be known as Akashvani[15] from 1957 [Prasar Bharati 2002]. On January 25, 1958, an unusual but shortlived experiment in the use of folk media for social communication was launched as an annual festival 'Songs of Nation Builders' in which folk musicians and dancers from different parts of India presented songs with a developmental content [Baruah 1983].

B V Keskar, country's longest serving minister of information and broadcasting for 10 years from 1952, patronised Indian classical and folk music and harboured an unconcealed aversion for 'cheap and vulgar' film music.[16] As AIR's classical music content rose to nearly 50%, Indians switched to Radio Ceylon's commercial service that played all the film songs that AIR's holier than thou dignity and conformation to 'good taste' and serious purpose did not permit [Page and Crawley 2001]. The Indian government was slow in responding to the challenges of foreign competition posed by Radio Ceylon (a phenomenon repeated with television in the 1990s) but eventually did launch an entertainment channel, Vividh Bharati, broadcasting Indian film music and other entertainment fare on October 3, 1957. Commercial advertising was introduced in the Bombay–Pune–Nagpur chain of Vividh Bharati stations 10 years later, in 1967 [Baruah 1983]. This had been one of the major recommendations of the Chanda Committee. At present there are 36 Vividh Bharati and commercial broadcasting stations operating in the country [Prasar Bharati 2002].

The Chanda Committee attributed the lack of popularity of AIR programmes also to the absence of any system for audience research to gauge the extent and quality

[15] Keskar is said to have explained that *Akashvani* was a kind of an all-India name and trademark for All India Radio and the word had been taken from Kannada where it was originally used for the Mysore Station during the British days.

[16] *Also see* David Lelyveld (1996) on how under Patel and even more so under Keskar, measures were taken to assure that the 'Hindu' side would prevail in music on AIR.

of listening of each programme that should ideally form the basis of policy decisions by planners for making programmes effective and appealing.

> Listener's research is an integral part of most broadcasting systems. Without a continuous and intimate touch with its audience a broadcasting system cannot fulfil the purpose for which it exists nor can it ensure maximum listening to its programmes in preference to others. Without a review, money and effort might be wasted in producing programmes, which do not attract listening. There is also the attendant risk of listeners tuning in into other broadcasts, which have undesirable features both morally and politically [MIB 1966:58].

This lack of systematic survey of preferences of listeners or of the impact of broadcasts was even more pronounced in case of rural services. The committee ascertained that absence of news, views and feedback along with undue publicity of government policies had made rural programmes unattractive and villagers were unable to identify with them owing to pedantic and stilted language and references to peculiar agricultural inputs and chemicals.

The earliest attempts at rural broadcasting go back to 1935, when private stations in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the United Provinces started programmes for rural audiences. AIR incorporated these stations into its network and rural programmes were started at Delhi, Madras and Lucknow stations in 1936, 1938 and 1939 respectively [Mathur and Neurath 1959]. Rural service became an integral component of all AIR stations from 1965 when Farm and Home Units were also established in 10 AIR stations to provide suitable technical support to farmers. Now all regional stations house these units and rural broadcasts are a crucial output of AIR [Baruah 1983, Chatterji 1991].

AIR's broadcasting to rural areas was designed essentially to garner support for the national enterprise of all-round development, to carry information of practical use to villagers, widen knowledge of national ideals and to provide entertainment [Mathur and Neurath, 1959]. The broadcasts used regional languages and local dialects and were meant for community rather than individual listening. Provision was also made in the Five-Year Plans to provide community listening sets in villages. Though the number of receiving sets had escalated to 150,000 by 1965–66, this scheme did not thrive because of problems of maintenance of receiving sets. By the 1970s the transistor revolution had taken over and the scheme was withdrawn [Chatterji 1991].

Although the use of radio for development was a cornerstone of public service broadcasting policy in India, no attempt to solicit people's participation even in the form of feedback, was made till 1956 when, an experiment in Farm Radio Forums

was conducted with the assistance of UNESCO in 150 villages across five districts of Maharashtra. It was based on a Canadian model and was designed to establish two-way communication between village audiences and programmer producers of the radio station. The theme of the rural radio forums was 'Listen, Discuss, Act!' [Singhal and Rogers 2001:70]. A pioneering effort for its time, "radio farm forum as an agent for transmission of knowledge proved to be a success beyond expectation" [Mathur and Neurath 1959:105] and was "very successful in communicating knowledge of agricultural techniques and encouraging participation in decision-making" [Page and Crawley 2001: 328].

Between 1959 and 1964 the movement gained strength and it was claimed that there were 7,500 forums in 30 odd radio stations in the country in 1964 after which nothing is heard about them [Chatterji 1991]. AIR failed to capitalise on lessons learnt from the farm forums project and it remained just an experiment (like the SITE and Kheda projects in the case of television later) in development potential of community involvement in media. However, the Chanda Committee evokes the success of Farm Radio Forums to institute faith in radio's enormous potential to carry developmental messages to poor, rural Indian households and that "given the right approach and the opportunity to discuss and find solutions to local problems, the farmer is receptive to new ideas and techniques" [MIB, 1966:11].

These observations were validated in the 1960s when AIR played a pivotal role in disseminating information of new techniques and practices to propel the green revolution. It served as a link between the agriculture extension service and farmers. Its experimental broadcasts from Trichinopoly Station in 1966 launched in the fertile rice growing areas of Tamil Nadu helped persuade farmers to adopt high yielding varieties of rice. It led to the new variety becoming known as 'Radio Paddy' [Page and Crawley 2001].

Media Misuse and Quest for Autonomy

The Chanda Committee attributed the failure of AIR to give 'purpose and substance' to the programmes and to reflect the development imperatives of national reconstruction to organisational deficiencies, inadequate financial resources and over-centralisation.

> ... it is not possible in the Indian context for a creative medium like broadcasting to flourish under a regiment (sic) of departmental rules and regulations. It is only through an institutional change that AIR can be liberated from the present rigid financial and administrative procedures of government (MIB, 1966:177).

The committee recommended the setting up of two separate autonomous public corporations for radio and television. The attempt was to reconcile autonomy with control by endowing AIR (and Doordarshan) with sufficient liberty in financial and managerial matters, while retaining clearly defined areas of regulation by the state. The committee was averse to AIR being employed as an instrument of the government and also to it being entrusted into private hands. It is notable that the committee was in favour of allowing universities, municipal corporations, and state governments to install transmitters. All these proposals were 'carefully considered' in 1970 by the government, but it was declared that, "the present is not an opportune time to consider the conversion of AIR into an autonomous corporation".[17] However, TV was separated from AIR under the name, "Doordarshan" on April 1, 1976 [MIB 1978].

AIR was blatantly misused as a government organ'[18] during the national emergency in 1975. In her address to the AIR station directors on September 9, 1975, Indira Gandhi said,

> ... while anybody is in government service, they are bound to obey the orders of the government. If they feel that the government policy is not right, they are unable to obey, they have some other views which they want to express, nobody is stopping them from resigning and joining any organisation where they will have that freedom [GOI 1977:8].

Several constraints were imposed on radio and television, the 'AIR code' (for broadcasters) was declared obsolete and there was a clampdown on oppositional views. The then minister of information and broadcasting, V C Shulkla, instructed AIR station directors that AIR was not a forum run by the government to debate on the conflicting ideologies but to make people 'understand' government policies. Further, as governments were run by parties, media must reflect the policies of the party in power. Credibility took a backseat, as AIR became a propaganda tool for the prime minister and her policies, but proved counter-productive during the elections as it further precipitated the existing demand for autonomy for the government-run media.

After the termination of emergency, the country's first nonCongress government pledged "genuine autonomy" to the electronic media. *The White Paper on the Misuse of the Mass Media* was commissioned, followed by the constitution of a working

[17] Cited in Thomas, 1990: 4.

[18] As stated in the Extracts of Indira Gandhi's address to the Conference of AIR Station Directors on September 9, 1975. See Appendix 6, Page 13 in MIB, 1977.

group headed by former newspaper editor, B G Verghese, in August 1977 to look into autonomy for the electronic media. The group was mandated:

> To examine the functional, financial and legal aspects of the proposal to give full autonomy to Akashvani and Doordarshan, consistent with accountability to parliament, keeping in mind the different forms of autonomous organisations existing in other democratic countries in the matters of broadcasting [MIB 1978:7, 37].

The working group proposed the formation of an autonomous National Broadcasting Trust, 'Akash Bharati', "a non-profit making body, an essential public service licensed to operate under a parliamentary charter and accountable to the parliament" [MIB 1978:21]. The apex of the trust was to consist of a board of trustees ('nyasis'), between 12 and 21 in number, drawn from among eminent men and women sensitive towards the role of the media.

Attributing the haphazard growth of broadcast media to the absence of a well-defined national communication policy, the group observed that the commitment to 'open government','a dialogue with the people', the thrust towards participative development from below, and decentralisation in political and economic decision-making imply the need for democratising communications through a 'transfer of power'.

> As mass media, radio and television must fit into a wider perception of a national communication policy or philosophy. Such a policy would be presumed to envisage a web of vertical and lateral communication designed to facilitate the transmission of informational, educational, and cultural messages not merely from government to people but from people to government. People to people, masses to decision-makers, rural to urban, the young to the rest and so on, at all levels and as a circular flow with switches for cross-cultural exchange. Dissenting voices and minority voices must be heard to complete the true harmony of national debate and expression [MIB 1978:18].

The working group was not in favour of two separate trusts for radio and TV though it urged for a distinctive identity for the two mass media under an integrated charter of Akash Bharati. Among the specific aims of the trust, the group included the task to produce and transmit varied programmes designed for all sections of the people. It emphasised that 'mass' does not necessarily imply a 'monolithic or homogeneous' national audience and that the trend in the world was towards catering to area and culture specific minority audiences [MIB 1978]. The group also identified that the trust should be authorised to grant licences to franchise stations through a board for education and extension broadcasts. These educational stations

would not broadcast news bulletins of their own and not take up any commercial broadcasting.

The misuse of media as a publicity vehicle had not ceased even during the tenure of a government that had promoted autonomy for broadcast media. However, in terms of opening up the media, it did introduce party election broadcasts in May 1977, 15 years after the Election Commission had recommended their transmission [Thomas 1990]. A watered-down Akash Bharati Bill was introduced in parliament, but it lapsed after the dissolution of the Lok Sabha in 1979 when the government fell. When the Congress government returned to power in 1980, it decided against freeing the media from government control, and instead, heralded an era of commercialisation even before the satellite invasion of the 1990s. With the ninth Asian Games in 1982 began a move to set up transmitters and to switch to colour on television. The expansion of television in the country entered a new phase as the multinationals and Indian monopolies started dictating terms.

This period witnessed more directives from the government in the form of policy guidelines. In 1980, an advisory committee headed by G Parthasarathi was created for restructuring media organisation to facilitate a more professional outlook. *News Policy for Broadcast Media* released in May 1982 was one of the products of this committee and the guidelines therein are followed to this day [Ninan 1998]. These cover wide-ranging topics related to news coverage particularly those considered crucial for national development, national integration and maintenance of communal peace [MIB 1982]. The document outlines some themes that require special coverage, one of them being the achievements and problems of development and lays emphasis on the use of AIR and Doordarshan news-gathering apparatus "to make a deliberate effort to explore new areas of development and nation building news. People's participation in such activities should be duly highlighted as also the significant work being done by voluntary agencies" [MIB 1982:3].

In December 1982, a working group on software for Doordarshan headed by P C Joshi was appointed to "prepare a software plan for Doordarshan, taking into consideration the main objectives of television in assisting in the process of social and economic development of the country and to act as an effective medium for providing information, education and entertainment" [MIB 1985:7]. Besides suggesting several steps for restoring the development function of television, the working group's report, *An Indian Personality for Television*, drew attention to the frequent use of national communication framework to present 'a Delhi-centric view of India'. It offered insights into opportunities and dangers of the technology-led communication revolution and emphasised the need to evolve "our own version of communication

revolution."[19] The report commented extensively on how "communication should help to create a participatory model of development, a participatory rural community in which information flows not only downwards, from governments to the people but also upwards from people to the government" [MIB 1985 Vol 2: 30]. The report refers to the German dramatist, Brecht's statement about radio being equally relevant for television and urges for changing television to 'receive as well to transmit', and "to let the listener speak as well as to hear" with a view to "turning the audience not only into pupils but into teachers".

Annotating McLuhan, the report says, "any software which does not evolve out of some form of public participation is weak in authenticity and appeal", and hence the need for incorporating "an intimate, participatory down-upwards orientation" in television and for encouraging "people to be participants in the process of generating software" [MIB 1985:13]. The counsels of the working group hold good for radio too, but the copies of this public document are not available easily for reference in the departments concerned. Neither the recommendations of Verghese Committee nor those of the Joshi Committee to render radio and television independent and to discourage their misuse by the government were implemented.

Prasar Bharati Bill vs Political Will

Nothing was done to facilitate autonomy till about 1989 when a non-Congress government, in order to keep its campaign promise of autonomy for state media, opened Akash Bharati for reconsideration. The bill that was produced in parliament was called Prasar Bharati. It differed in significant ways from the exercise undertaken 11 years earlier by the Verghese Committee and illustrating how thinking on the subject of autonomy for the government media had evolved. The first was envisaged as a trust, the second as a corporation. Akash Bharati provided for trustees, Prasar Bharati for a board of governors [Ninan 1998].

The Akash Bharati Bill recommended granting broadcast franchise licences to Universities and other educational institutions through its Licensing Board, while the Prasar Bharati Bill of 1989. Both the drafts were similar in terms of the objectives of serving the rural, illiterate, underprivileged populations, providing adequate coverage to languages of various regions of the country, informing and stimulating national consciousness in regard to the status and problems of women, and keeping in mind the needs and interests of young, social and cultural minorities, the tribal population [Thomas 1990]. The autonomy granted by the bill that was finally passed

[19]The report attributes this expression to Yashpal (1983).

in 1990 was watered down by among other things, the supplementary provision for incorporation of a parliamentary committee to oversee the functioning of the Corporation. Parliament passed this bill, but the government fell before it could be notified. This act was then kept in cold storage for seven years till it was notified in 1997.

On the autonomy front, no advancement was made by the Congress government to execute Prasar Bharati, as amendments to the act were still not complete. The ministry that had been avoiding putting its own house in order with respect to granting autonomy sprang into action as cable-delivered foreign satellite channels started making rapid inroads into the country in the 1990s. The exigency for autonomy was expressed for becoming competitive and commercially up-market as also the need for monitoring the use of airwaves (discussed in ensuing section of the article). The government abruptly laid down the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act in March 1995 to regulate cable television and to influence cable distribution in favour of Doordarshan. Though AIR was not facing competition from private broadcasters, these developments were sending loud and clear signals that it was time to sit up and take notice.

Meanwhile, a high power committee that had been appointed in 1995 to remodel the role, organisation, and functions of Prasar Bharati in the context of the influx of foreign satellite channels in the 1990s furnished its report. This committee, [MIB 1996a] headed by Nitish Sengupta, put forward a provision, to be included in the Prasar Bharati Act, for an independent Radio and Television Authority of India to grant licences to domestic or foreign satellite channels and permit them to uplink from Indian soil [Ninan 1998]. The committee's recommendations with respect to Prasar Bharati sought to dispense with the changes introduced in the 1989 draft before the Bill was finalised in 1990. In order to cope with unprecedented reduction in budgetary support from the government, the MIB decided to refurbish the system for marketing commercial time on Doordarshan and All India Radio. A committee headed by Siddhartha Sen set out to examine the needs of both advertisers and viewers and the adaptations that were warranted to make the prevailing system in Doordarshan and AIR commercially effectual [MIB 1996b].

In July 1997, the United Front government decided to notify Prasar Bharati, which had been languishing since August 1990. The Sengupta Committee recommendations were overlooked and what came about was diluted autonomy. The act was brought into force on September 15, 1997 and Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) was established on November 23, 1997. Amendments to augment autonomy conferred by it were made in October 1997 by introducing some of the changes suggested by the Sengupta Committee.

Hostilities with the MIB, controversies, conflicts at the toplevel, dearth of funds, unframed rules and regulations for recruitments, and control by government cadre have marked the period following the setting up of Prasar Bharati. With just over half of the members nominated to its board, it is being looked at "as a signboard more than a board."[20] No significant changes are visible in the working pattern of AIR, except an elongation in the chain of command. It still continues to be centralised and bureaucratic in its functioning and retains its role and reputation as a propaganda tool for the government.

Both AIR and Doordarshan support an enormous structure that keeps growing endlessly as a medium, but in terms of messages, there is minimal manoeuvrability and negligible scope for innovative programming as "big people continue to address small people."[21] They are unable to meet with the diverse expectations of different sections of the society or play a constructive role in social change or nation building efforts. With the macro-level media environment increasingly becoming challenging and competitive owing to the effects of globalisation and commercialisation, the role of Prasar Bharati as a public service broadcaster becomes even more relevant. But the lack of political will and faulty application appears to be killing an otherwise workable proposition.

An attempt to revitalise the role of Prasar Bharati in the status of a public service broadcaster was made by setting up of the Prasar Bharati Review Committee[22] that submitted its report on May 20, 2000. The committee was of the opinion that:

> The public service broadcaster plays a key role in any society, especially, in a large and thriving democracy. It must be a part of 'civil society', independent of and distinct from the government. In fact, the public service broadcaster must act as one of the bedrocks of society, and seek to continuously enlarge the so-called 'public sphere'. It must play host to informed debate, provide space for alternative and dissenting viewpoints, be a voice of the voiceless and give substance to the phrase "participatory democracy" [MIB 2000a: 16].

The committee reiterated that market forces cannot be expected to take care of these objectives and for Prasar Bharati, as the public broadcaster, revenue maximi-

[20] B G Verghese in an interview with the author.

[21] *Ibid*.

[22] Ministry of information and broadcasting, government of India constituted a committee on November 22, 1999 comprising N R Narayanamurthy, chairman and chief executive, Infosys; Kiran Karnik, managing director, Discovery Communications India; Shunu, chairman and chief executive, Quadra Advisory, marketing consultant; R C Mishra, jt secretary (Broadcasting, ministry of I&B); Rajeeva Ratna Shah, chief executive, Prasar Bharati, special Invitee; to carry out a comprehensive review of Prasar Bharati.

sation need not be an immediate goal and advertising revenue earned should not be the only yardstick for judging its performance:

> Alternative indices — related to audience size and share programme content and impact, channel reach and loyalty — are more meaningful and must be used (MIB, 2000a: 81).

The committee suggested several amendments to the Prasar Bharati Act 1990 to enable it to survive in a highly competitive environment created by global media technology and to create public service content of highest quality. The committee reiterated its faith in decentralisation and devolution and in its recommendations and emphasised that the local stations must involve local groups and voluntary organisations in programme production. It also recommended giving serious consideration to:

> ... the franchising of local radio stations by Prasar Bharati to selected local community and voluntary groups on an experimental basis. Now that FM radio has been privatised, we do hope that the long-standing opposition and aversion to such a worthwhile step will fade away [MIB 2000a: 37].

Liberalisation, Privatisation and Regulation

The broadcasting dialogue assumed an altogether new dimension with the advent of cable operators and the beaming of satellite channels by Hong Kong-based STAR TV into India in the year 1991. Conditions for broadcasting changed radically [Pavarala and Kumar 2001a]. Faced with the eventuality of private sector competition, autonomy, genuine or otherwise, for state-owned media seemed inevitable. At the same time, the governments were faced with a new set of questions, which they were quite ill equipped to resolve. What should be the structure of regulatory system to take account of the invasion via satellites, and of the new media technologies? What was to be the fate of national (read political) objectives? Competition in programming as well as commerce or advertising was another unfamiliar territory. All these concerns coupled with a few other landmark developments saw the revival of some of the critical issues concerning broadcasting in India after three decades of unimplemented good intentions.

In February 1995, the Supreme Court delivered a historic judgment in *Ministry of Information and Broadcasting vs Cricket Association of Bengal* http://www.mib.nic.in/information&b/POLICY. The court ruled that:

> Airwaves constitute public property and must be utilised for advancing public good [operative part of judgment available on MIB web site].

The spirit of the judgment was to spell the end of the government monopoly of broadcasting. But it was not in favour of deregulation of airwaves for use by the private business firms. It stated that, "no individual had a right to utilise them (airwaves) at his choice and pleasure and for purposes of his choice including profit".

In two separate concurring judgments, the court said the right of free speech guaranteed by Article 19(1) (a) did not include the right to use airwaves which were public property.

> From the standpoint of Article 19(1)(a) what is paramount is the right of the listeners and viewers and not the right of the broadcaster — whether the broadcaster is the state, public corporation or a private individual or body.
>
> While the freedom guaranteed by Article 19(1) (a) does include the right to receive and impart information, no one can claim the fundamental right to do so by using or employing public property. Only where the statute permits him to use the public property, then only — and subject to such conditions and restrictions as the law may impose — he can use the public property, viz, airwaves. In other words, Article 19(1)(a) does not enable a citizen to impart his information, views and opinion by using the airwaves. He can do so without using the airwaves [as cited in MIB 1996d].

Broadcasting media as a whole should promote freedom of expression and speech and, therefore, should be able to enjoy freedom from government monopoly and control subject to certain regulation by a public body. In this connection, the court decreed:

> The broadcasting media should be under the control of the public as distinct from government. This is the command implicit in Article 19(1)(a). It should be operated by a public statutory corporation or corporations ... [as cited in MIB 1997].

The judgment did not, however, endorse dismantling of controls. Private broadcasting, if permitted, cannot be left to the market forces. It needs to be regulated in the larger public interest. The observations of the Supreme Court in this regard are as follows:

> The airwaves or frequencies are a public property. Their use has to be controlled and regulated by a public authority in the interests of the public and to prevent the invasion of their rights [as cited in MIB 1997].

The judgment ordered the central government to "take immediate steps to establish an autonomous public authority to control and regulate the use of the airwaves". The ministry of information and broadcasting set about drafting broadcasting legislation that would establish a broadcast authority and open up the airwaves to private parties, individuals, and public bodies wishing to enter the field of broadcasting and telecasting.

While this exercise to place the role of Broadcasting Authority of India in the context of a comprehensive Broadcast Law was still being carried out, a parliamentary subcommittee formulated a working paper on national media policy in March 1996. The objectives of this draft media policy included several of those that have been asserted in earlier laws and reports [MIB 1996]. The newer concerns mentioned related to those that warned against permitting growth of monopoly in any media, and expressed themselves in favour of restricting cross-media ownership. The working paper took a stand against permitting direct or indirect foreign equity participation in private broadcasting companies [Ninan 1998]. The subcommittee laid emphasis on the setting up of non-commercial broadcasting stations to be run by universities, educational institutions, *panchayats*, local bodies, state governments, etc. It was in favour of allowing state and local governments and NGOs to enter the field of broadcasting.

It was only in 1997 that some urgency was expressed for broadcasting law for India, "in view of the impending start of the much more powerful digital Direct to Home (DTH) services any time by the next year"[MIB 1997]. In May 1997, the Broadcast Bill for setting up a Broadcasting Authority of India was introduced in parliament. It corroborated the fundamental principles of all the earlier efforts to reposition Broadcasting in India. The Broadcasting Bill 1997 may in fact be seen as a confluence of the major imperatives derived from constitutional clauses, committee reports, judgments, and policy statements concerning broadcasting in India. But, the government fell again and the draft Broadcasting Bill along with the working paper on media policy remains a major piece of unfinished business till today.

On the radio front, in July 1999, it was announced that private companies registered in India would be allowed to set up 101 independent FM stations in 40 cities. Of the 148 frequencies identified for 40 centres, 40 have been reserved for educational channels to be operated by the human resource development ministry without payment of any licence fee [MIB 2002]. The auction of FM frequencies in favour of the open-market lobby is a perverted interpretation of the Supreme Court judgment. None of the recommendations favouring alternative media practices in the country seem to be materialising in the near future, as the government has now decided to tackle the issue of convergence of telecommunications, information technology

and electronic media before announcing a comprehensive policy that will cover the entire communications sector.

The Draft Convergence Bill proposes the setting up of a Communications Commission of India on the lines of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the US to manage, plan and monitor spectrum for non-strategic and commercial usage of communication infrastructure. The commission would also grant licences while exercising some (among several other) of the following principles:

> - that communication services are made *available at* affordable cost to all uncovered areas including the rural, remote, hilly and tribal areas;
> - that there is increasing access to information for greater empowerment of citizens and towards economic development;
> - that quality, plurality, diversity and choice of services are promoted.
>
> [MIB 2000b: Clause 19]

As the country still awaits a comprehensive media policy and a broadcast law to enable democratisation of media, efforts are on for carving out an alternative media sector in India, which would neither be state-run nor market-driven. The groups advocating community radio as part of the movement for an alternative public realm can only hope that the permission to use radio for development goals at the community level and to represent the priorities of the vulnerable would be granted soon.

Conclusion

Radio broadcasting in free India endeavoured to shape up in the mould of public service broadcasting. According to communication scholar Dennis McQuail (1994:126) the idea of 'public service' broadcasting encompasses eight principles:

> Geographical universality of provision and reception; the aim of providing for all tastes and interests; catering for minorities; having a concern for national identity and community; keeping broadcasting independent from government and vested interests; having some element of direct funding from the public (thus not only from advertisers); encouraging competition in programmes and not just for audiences; and encouraging the freedom of broadcasters.

However, the state-controlled broadcasting in India ended up following what Herman and Chomsky (1988) sketch out as 'the propaganda model' where media

serve "to mobilise support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity", becoming a propaganda tool for government policies and actions.

In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite [Herman and Chomsky, 1988:1].

With liberalisation of the economy in India, broadcasting witnessed backdoor and reluctant privatisation, but eventually, as Kiran Karnik, CEO, Discovery Channel, opines, forces of commercialisation prevailed, leading to a shift towards empty entertainment [Sen 2000]. As Stephen Barnard points out,

> The classical argument against commercialisation of mass communication media is that pursuit of advertising revenues encourages programming assumed to appeal to the greatest number, thereby marginalising less popular tastes and interests. It creates an environment most conducive to reception of advertising message, leading to programming that is undemanding, unchallenging and pacifying [Barnard 2000: 51].

Technology-led globalisation of media did not do anything to change the order of things for broadcasting in India. It led to the concentration of ownership in a handful of transnational media conglomerates, further diminishing the freedom and diversity of information. As cultural homogenisation became the order of the day, the uniformity of the content rendered meaningless the increase in the number of information sources [Pavarala and Kumar 2001b]. As a result, the shrinking of democratic spaces has weakened civil society, allowing the state and the market to have unfettered control over the minds of the people.

These concerns have been articulated in several reports of committees set up to examine the status of broadcasting in India and also in numerous policy documents. In spite of plainly stated objectives, little has been done to re-orient broadcasting to produce meaningful content that dovetails rather than emulates current practices of commercial radio, and addresses the developmental, social, cultural, communal and democratic imperatives of the country. No effort has been made to ensure that the weakest and the vulnerable are empowered through access and control of media-technologies.

For instance, All India Radio's 76 local radio stations (LRS) were mandated to produce field-based programmes with accent on local problems, news and views, and local talent. The organisation's annual report states:

> What distinguishes the local radio from the regional network is its down to earth, intimate approach. The programmes of the local radio are area specific. They are flexible

> and spontaneous enough to enable the station to function as the mouthpiece of the local community [Prasar Bharati 2002].

In reality, however, owing to inherent deficiencies of a bureaucratic system these stations only replicate the style of working and even the programming patterns of a regional station. Their staff is ill equipped to run them in a manner that is democratic and participatory.

Even as the well-intentioned state broadcaster is frozen into inaction, commercial broadcasting has revived a plummeting medium. But the latter's agenda to accumulate profits renders it incapable of exploiting the potential of the medium for development. Radio, designated by several as a medium of the poor, seems to have been hijacked by the elites, propelling a number of civil society organisations to articulate the need for alternatives in the form of popular and community-based media. The community radio initiatives by several groups across India for a share of the airwaves, which are 'public property', are one significant indication of this popular resistance.

The major barrier in ushering a vibrant community radio sector in India appears to be the perception that it poses a threat to the power structure. This perception is based on what White (1994) calls a zero-sum notion of 'distributive' power. If, as she suggests, power is understood as 'generative', where by different groups can generate their own sources of power necessary to accomplish social, cultural and community objectives, this fear about loss of control could be seen as misplaced. Radio must, therefore, be looked at as a tool for empowerment, an appropriate technology to conscientise and build capacities of communities to become active participants in development.

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